Summary of “Backward Design” by Amy Childre, Jennifer R. Sands and Pope

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Exceptional instruction requires an adept teacher to magnificently juggle inspiring students’ interests, maintaining their attention and simultaneously challenging and strengthening their abilities. More often than not, however, instruction is taught straight from the textbook and requires rote memorization, which rarely requires the students to learn and retain the new information. In order to acquire and maintain new information, a teacher must activate students’ prior knowledge, meet all of their exception needs, and measure the amount they have retained. With classes reaching thirty students, how might one teacher handle all of these requirements? Backwards design proposes a template teachers can follow to aid them in juggling the growing needs of their classrooms. By understanding students individually, prioritizing, designing accurate assessments, and creating appropriate activities, teachers can more effectively teach their students any subject.

Teachers must consider the many needs of their classrooms. They must consider the culture of the community, its resources, the socioeconomic level, extracurricular activities and the educational background. After understanding the factors surrounding the classroom, the teacher must discover the diverse students within the classroom. The teacher must consider the individual needs of her students. She needs to consider both Individualized Education Programs and learning styles for every student. After this, the teacher needs to diversify her instruction to meet all of the students’ needs, which all needs to be premeditated. As Amy Childre writes, “Accomodations must be woven throughout the fabric of instruction; never should they be an afterthought, an add-on to a lesson” (Childre, 2009). Although difficult, backward design makes this feasible.

Next, the teacher must identify her priorities for instruction. The teacher must look at the necessary standards for instruction and execute concise instruction targeting the important aspects of that learning goal, emphasizing deep understanding. To assist the teacher in creating relevance and inspiration for her students, she should create essential questions to engage her learners. Essential questions bridge the standards to the students themselves by piquing their interests. Essential questions should entice students to delve into the subject, requiring them to curiously search for understanding. Essential questions will not be answered in one lesson, but they should inspire inquiry. Teachers must also understand the prior knowledge and skills of their students in order to scaffold effectively. Often, learning is sequential, and missing steps is detrimental to student understanding.

After prioritizing, a teacher needs to determine how she will assess understanding. When using Backward Design, a teacher will create the assessments before she begins teaching the unit. According to Amy Childre, before creating assessments, a teacher should ask herself, “What evidence will demonstrate student understanding of the unit standard?” (Childre, 2009). Instead of simply recalling memorized facts, teachers should expect deeper understanding. In fact, testing should be used as a formative assessment, as opposed to a summative assessment. When the tests are used as formative assessments, they can determine if the students have the knowledge necessary to perform on summative projects that require deeper understanding. As part of assessment, teachers should create projects that will require thorough understanding. Additionally, teachers should require students to orally or in writing explain, analyze and evaluate the new information. Teachers should use constant informal assessments to gauge comprehension and to help them determine if any students need additional assistance or supports.

Lastly, the teacher needs to plan and create appropriate learning activities to integrate the newly acquired knowledge into the students’ long-term memories. When designing these learning activities, Amy Childre suggests the teacher to ask, “How will you encourage immersion in and exploration of the essential questions? How will you use the learning activities to build knowledge and skills, and promote deeper understanding?” (Childre, 2009). Throughout the unit, teachers should daily engage students in essential questions and unit vocabulary, break instruction into manageable parts, and weave assessments throughout unit. By breaking instruction into manageable parts, teachers can divide class time into mini-instruction, activity and reflection/discussion sessions. Teacher should design activities that differ from the well-known teacher-directed and textbook-driven instruction. Instead, teachers should promote activities that make the content relevant and relate it to real-life. Teachers should aspire to make the learning relevant to students’ pasts, presents and futures. Childre writes, “Learning activities should encourage students to apply information, make interpretive decisions, and/or synthesize information to generate knowledge and gain understanding of the larger issue” (Childre, 2009).

With the proper planning outlined by Backward Design, teachers can plan effective lessons for students that will remain with them for their lifetimes. Teachers now have a template to help them juggle the many needs of their classrooms. By understanding students individually, prioritizing, designing accurate assessments, and creating appropriate activities, teachers can more effectively teach their subjects. The students of a teacher who efficiently uses Backward Design will likely remember the subject matter for years to come, or, at least, after summer vacation.

References

Childre, A., Sands, J. R., & Pope, S. (2009). Backward Design. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *41*(5), 6-14.